

**FEAP NEWSLETTER**  
*A Series of Educational Articles from your  
Faculty & Employee Assistance Program*

**MANAGING  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
CHANGE**

Today's business environment produces change in the workplace more suddenly and frequently than ever before. Mergers, acquisitions, new technology, restructuring and downsizing are all factors that contribute to a growing climate of uncertainty. Jobs, health, even marriages can be placed at risk, jeopardizing productivity and profitability.

People have deep attachments to their organization, work group, and way of working. The ability to adapt to changing work conditions is key for individual and organizational survival. Change will be ever present and learning to manage and lead change includes not only understanding human factors but also skill to manage and lead change effectively.

**The Reaction to Change**

During the change process, there are common predictable stressors, but how we react to those stressors will differ for each person since we are all unique individuals. The anxiety and confusion that result from not knowing what lies ahead can create stress. People will utilize basic defenses when there is a high degree of uncertainty. In this state of ambiguity, people can easily resort to distrust, withdrawal and self-protection. People are told that the old ways are no longer working and often this message becomes personalized that they are not valued.

For the employee, the emotional reactions while going through an organizational change can be similar to the stages of grief associated with personal loss. The employee may initially feel shock or denial when the organizational change is announced. Reactions such as "they can't do this," "this can't be happening" are common. At this stage, most employees will want to know exactly how this change will affect them, their benefits, their work hours, their family and will not "hear" much

other information. At the next stage the employee may feel anger, resentment or sadness in response to the changes. "This isn't fair," "why are they doing this to me?" are normal reactions and productivity on the job is usually lower as employees discuss and process the changes among themselves. Tearfulness is common.

The employee experiencing organizational change at a personal level often feels threatened and is fearful. Managers recognizing this can better intervene with employees by acknowledging feelings, letting the employee vent and ask questions, and by being supportive that change is difficult. The Manager who moves straight into why the change is best for everyone and how business is going to be conducted disregards the human nature element - the emotions that are normal and natural for anyone feeling threatened by change to feel. At every step in the process of implementing an organizational change, a good Manager will ask him/herself "How might I react to this information or these changes if I were in the employee's shoes?" and try to tailor responses accordingly.

As the organization implements the changes though, the reality of the change becomes present and employees may either resist the changes or start to adjust to the changes depending on the person. The employee who continues to resist, remains angry and is labeled as "difficult" is feeling more threatened and may need some one-to-one time with the Manager to discuss the changes or at some point, may need clarification from the Manager about performance expectations in light of the changes.

**Effects Seen at the Workplace**

**Absenteeism:** As individuals see jobs eliminated and friends leaving, they may work longer hours. They feel more concern about their own security and future and put less effort into maintaining balance in their lives. Complaints of burnout increase. Health may deteriorate, and stress related symptoms increase. More workdays are missed for illness.

**Reduction In Productivity:** Less work gets done even by employees who come to work. In an

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atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty, individuals may withdraw support from one another and become self-protective. Superiors may provide less information and that which is provided may be more inconsistent. Working relationships can deteriorate as competition increases and turf battles are intensified in order to justify and protect departments and jobs.

Loss of Valued Employees: Confident, skilled, and experienced employees in the midst of ambiguity and uncertainty may be looking for or are invited to consider other career opportunities.

Another stress may result from the feeling of being insufficiently skilled as changes are implemented and new ways of conducting business begin. New practices and skills must be intentionally learned and practiced. Consider what you have to offer and what you need to learn.

There is no right or wrong way to react to change. But, there are things you can do to help yourself adjust to change and get involved in positive ways.

### **Dealing with Organizational Change**

Individuals can reduce the impact of change and resulting stress by focusing on the value to be gained. The following are some ways to help approach change with a positive attitude:

- ❑ Keep an open mind. Do not assume that the results of change will be negative. Change may be the best thing that ever happened to you.
- ❑ Stay flexible. Be ready to let go of the old and try the new. Talking with colleagues can help allay stress and foster a supportive environment.
- ❑ Be supportive of colleagues. It is important that people recognize each other's contributions on a regular basis and show appreciation for one another.
- ❑ Take an active role in the change process. Learn new skills, offer suggestions, set goals for yourself.
- ❑ Give change a chance to work. Be patient; change takes time.

- ❑ Ignore rumors. Instead, focus on gathering as many facts as you can about change. Talk with your supervisor when you have questions.
- ❑ Pay attention to yourself. It is important to learn to manage stress. People who feel good mentally and physically are better able to handle change. Eat a nutritious diet, get enough sleep, exercise, limit alcohol use and utilize relaxation/stress management techniques (e.g., deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation), so your body and mind are able to deal with change.



### **Change is the Present and Future**

People tend to blame the organization or top management for the changes occurring within the organization. Top management's actions are usually reactions to some outside force, such as stiffer competition, shifts in the marketplace or new technology. It is important to realize that change is a key to surviving and growing in today's global economy.



Change is inevitable and we will be surfing on this wave of transition. Without change we would run the risk of becoming stale and unresponsive. The challenge we face is to learn to move through this wave of transition as easily and creatively as possible.

**If you are experiencing difficulty dealing with organizational change, you can contact your EAP for free, confidential help. You may reach your EAP at (434) 243-2643 or (800) 847-9355.**